

*Reconciling Ethnicity and Nation:
Contending Discourses in Fiji's
Constitutional Reform*

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The only thing left with the Fijian people is leadership of this country. In business we are behind, in education we are behind. Therefore leadership should be in indigenous Fijian hands.

PITA NAGUSUCA, SUBMISSION TO CONSTITUTIONAL
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We Indians are not happy, because we are part and parcel of Fijian people. How we are omitted? [from the 1990 constitution] . . . When Fijians are photo, Indians are frame. When Fijians are shirt, Indians are buttons. You take the frame out, the photo drops. You take the buttons out, shirt looks ugly and useless.

PARMANAND SINGH, SUBMISSION 024044
TO CONSTITUTIONAL REVIEW COMMISSION

The political logic of accepting difference is inventing and supporting institutions that help difference to be maintained. It is not necessary to create one people and one nation; rather, we should learn to view a system of difference as our unity.

SUBRAMANI, *Altering Imagination*

Since the first party struggle in the last decade of colonial rule, Fiji's politics have dramatized a conflict of paradigms for making a national society that is now a pressing issue of our time: whether in a society fraught by ethnic division shared interests and values can be encouraged to transcend difference, or whether the nation can only be made by the institutionalization of difference in the political system and public ideology. In

Fiji, this vexed question is complicated by the ideology of indigenous rights—the native Fijians' claims to privilege and the fact that they have long held a political dominance over the immigrant Indians who form 44 percent of the population. The problem is to reconcile a concept of indigenous paramountcy with the development of an equitable national society for which Indian labor, capital, and skill have long been crucial.

This dilemma and its possible resolution were highlighted by the course of crisis and rapprochement during the last thirteen years—from ethnic military coups to a constitutional formula for power sharing and the protection of human rights. Between 1992 and 1997 the mood of public debate shifted from the testy defensiveness, aggression, and disdain of most Fijian leaders, and bitterness and rebuke from their Indian counterparts, to an optimistic accord. A remarkable feature of the constitutional reform was the extent of Fijian leaders' concessions and of their unity behind the final proposals, despite the emergence of greater political division among Fijians since the coups and a continuing widespread popular wish for ethnic hegemony to be preserved.

In this paper I examine some of the narratives about Fiji produced for the review of the 1990 constitution (the first phase of the reform process), their relation to different dimensions of the society, and the prospect of managing ethnic difference and conflict in shaping Fiji as a nation. While General Sitiveni Rabuka has been the dominant player in the drama of the last thirteen years, he has acted within limits and opportunities set by forces in a political field. My discussion highlights a conjunction of factors in this field: Fijian ethnonationalist militancy, local and international pressures to moderate Fijian political dominance, and features of Fijian chiefship that, while integral to the ethnic opposition and sometimes amplifying it, have also helped to control the ethnonationalist potential and to facilitate conciliation in ethnic relations.

DILEMMAS OF NATION MAKING

More than any other event in Fiji's history, Rabuka's military coups aggravated conflict between indigenous Fijians and Indians. Many Indians suffered oppression by the Fijian-dominated army, and the coups encouraged violence or intimidation by some Fijian civilians; the Indian response has been forbearing restraint. A new constitution introduced in 1990 entrenched Fijian control based on ethnic constituencies and ethnic reser-

vation of the most senior offices in the state.¹ Postcoup government up to 1999 was mainly Fijian (partly because Indian leaders refused to participate). Indians were marginalized in civil service promotions and in access to financial assistance. They and their property continue to be the main target of violent crime by unemployed young Fijians, and their temples have occasionally been attacked by vandals. The election in 1987 of a new government led by the Fijian doctor and trade unionist Timoci Bavadra had signified the possibility of overcoming the ethnic division in politics (Lawson 1991; Lal 1992; Sutherland 1992). But the small Fijian support for the Labour Party (a partner in the Bavadra government) steadily diminished (from 10 percent of Fijian voters in 1987, to below 1 percent by 1994).

Yet cooperation was not broken. Rabuka became prime minister in 1992 by defeating a Fijian rival with the aid of some of the Indian leaders he had overthrown at gunpoint. Solidarity in the trade union movement remains largely intact, and Rabuka's populist image has been enhanced by his sympathy for farmers and wage workers. New ties were formed in town politics and between Indian businesspeople and Fijian politicians. Many Fijian parents continued to favor Indian-controlled mixed-race schools for the education of their children, and the Indian-managed soccer organization continued to rely heavily on Fijian players. Relations between Fijian village folk and their Indian neighbors typically remained friendly, and farmers formed interethnic teams to compete in the Sugar Growers Council elections. The coups and their aftermath did not generally dispossess Indians of their leases of Fijian land.

The principal Fijian leaders eventually agreed that the constitution must be changed to enable a sharing of government. The reform was achieved partly on the basis of a rapport that grew between Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka and the Indian leader Jai Ram Reddy, reminiscent of the understanding between Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara and Siddiq Koya that facilitated the transition to independence in 1970 after a phase of ethnic tension (Norton 1990; Lal 1992).

The historical significance of the coups may well prove to be the impetus they gave to a nation-making project more surely based than that inaugurated by independence. They provoked debate between polarized visions, one affirming the equality of all citizens, the other insisting on preserving Fijian political supremacy and a primarily Fijian identity for the nation. The review and reform of the republic's constitution con-

ducted from 1995 to 1997 centered on the question of how to achieve a compromise between ethnic and civic conceptions of the nation.

In most other postcolonial states of Oceania, discourses on nationhood have focused on ideas of homogeneous identity. In the Polynesian islands of Samoa these are well grounded in a cultural uniformity. In the Melanesian states of Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu, political elites attempt to define a national identity that bridges a multiplicity of local linguistic and cultural communities. Studies of nation making in these places emphasize efforts to submerge difference in new images of a transcendent collectivity, and the local diversity itself allows a clearer slate for such encompassing representations than in an ethnically bipolar country such as Fiji (Tonkinson 1982; Babadzan 1988; Li Puma 1995; Jacobsen 1995).

Fiji is in some respects more intractably divided, yet in other ways more united than its Melanesian neighbors. The ethnic division (locally termed *racial*) resulted from labor migration and the colonial practices by which Fijians and immigrant Indians were governed—separately for most, but linked in a centrally managed system distributing leases of Fijian clan lands to Indian farmers and businesspeople that became a foundation of the most advanced capitalist economy in the Pacific Islands (Norton 1986, 1999). The economic and governmental structures for a national society are more strongly developed than in the other island states, and for several decades there has been dialogue about nation making, punctuated by defining moments of conflict, crisis, and rapprochement.

It is hard to conceive how a discourse on the nation that might strengthen interethnic accord in Fiji could be grounded in anything other than a recognition of difference and complementarity in ideology and in political institutions. This point, long a central theme in my writing on Fiji (Norton 1977, 1986, 1990), has recently been reinforced by Martha Kaplan (1995a, 1995b). Profound cultural differences persist. Inter-marriage is rare, and while English is the lingua franca, most people prefer to converse in vernaculars. Almost all Fijians are Christians, and most Indians are Hindus (80 percent) or Muslims (15 percent). There is little interethnic socializing outside work, school, and some clubs and sports, and reciprocal denigrative stereotyping persists.² Conciliatory rhetoric among political leaders centers on images of coexistence and partnership rather than integration.³

Although Indian religious festivals are given respectful coverage in the

media, with celebratory messages from Fijian as well as Indian political leaders, there has been little attempt to create a narrative of shared history and citizenship, and images of Fijian culture predominate in the public domain. Fijian Indian scholar Subramani lamented that “the absence of larger narratives . . . to some extent accounts for the absence of a national sense” (1995, 233). Kaplan noted the lack of a “convincing narrative of mutual substance, history, or interdependence,” and the dominance of Fijian chiefly rituals in the “rites of the nation” (1995a, 108, 116). Henry Rutz described postcoup Fiji as “a nation made in the image of ‘the Fijian way of life’” (1995, 87). This trend has been reinforced by the inclination of most Methodist Church leaders to emphasize Christianity as a marker of Fijian identity in opposition to Hinduism and Islam, and to the capitalist economy in which Fijians have been disadvantaged (Rutz and Balkan 1992).

Some Indian bodies have responded to Fijian ethnocentrism by affirming pride in religion and other aspects of cultural identity, as dramatized in a more flamboyant celebration of the Hindu festival of Diwali, and in enlarged conventions of the TISI Sangam, an organization of Hindus whose forbears came from southern India. On these occasions leaders exhort Indians to maintain their pride and determination. The completion of a magnificent new Hindu temple in 1993 was, a leader declared, “a reaffirmation of the Indians’ faith in Fiji as a homeland and a symbol of our hopes and aspirations” (CRC-S 002001).

The paucity of images of shared citizenship was highlighted by the contradictory symbolism in celebrations of the twenty-fifth anniversary of independence from colonial rule staged during the initial phase of the constitutional review. The leading daily newspaper featured a cover photo of two school students (Fijian boy and Indian girl) lighting “the flame of unity,” showing “how people of different races can . . . promote togetherness” (*Fiji Times*, 7 Oct 1995). In a television address Rabuka invited viewers to participate in his vision of “an achieving nation, rich in diversity . . . a nation of several spiritual values, a nation dancing to many cultural forms” (Fiji One TV, 1 Oct 1995). There was much rhetoric about “unity in diversity” and Fiji as “a family” of different peoples. Yet the highlight was exclusively Fijian: a flaming torch representing the “spirit of Fiji” was lit by President Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara in the old capital, Levuka, and carried by costumed “warriors,” sprinting from village to village, chief to chief, finally to be handed to Rabuka at a sports ground

in Suva. Not an Indian could be seen in this performance, only in the crowd. A more recent theatrical portrayal of ethnic relations, employing at its most dramatic point the metaphor of a relationship between a Fijian youth and an Indian girl, emphasized at that moment difference and tension more than resolution (Thomas 1997).

Nonetheless, a feature of Fijian and Indian ethnic difference that has favored accommodation is the embedding of collective identities far more in the routine social relations and cultural practices of intragroup life than in oppositional assertion against other ethnic groups. The sense of security of identity that this circumstance has generally sustained has offset tensions arising from economic inequalities and political conflict and facilitated cooperation (Norton 1993a, 1993b; Jayawardena 1980).

It is of course ironic that social scientists have been giving increasing attention to questions of the nation just as its economic and cultural foundations are eroded by the forces of globalization (Foster 1991; Otto and Thomas 1997). To talk of nation making while witnessing "the growing importance of the international within the national" (Jacobsen 1995, 94) seems almost anachronistic. The global vectors are starkly present in Fiji in the form of a vibrant and rapidly growing consumer culture of supermarkets, television, fast food outlets, and cinema complexes. Households in remote villages and in the bustling towns are one moment viewing news broadcasts of ceremonies for installations or funerals of traditional chiefs, and then American or New Zealand "soaps," interrupted by blaring advertisements for houseware stores. Increasing numbers of families, Fijian as well as Indian, have branches overseas, and there is much international travel.

Yet the globalization process itself contributes to discourses about the nation by providing some of their values, idioms, and icons (Foster 1991). Slogans and symbols such as "unity in diversity," Fiji as "a family," and the flaming torch of "the spirit of Fiji," are drawn from the international experience. And as globalizing forces strengthen, so, too, does the propensity to antagonistic assertions of group identity within nation states, encouraged partly by international ideological and political movements. International expressions of the indigenous rights movement have encouraged Fijian chauvinism, and Indian political parties respond by invoking international discourses about equality, reinforced by support from overseas trade union bodies and governments, and by foreign diplomats in Fiji.

The polarity of universalism versus ethnic particularism in local polit-

ical discourse has its parallel in academic debate. Much scholarly writing since the coups has failed to consider as problematic the distinctive structures and processes of Fiji's politics, especially how interethnic relationships have been patterned in society and political economy. There has been a mistaken premise that a choice must be made between an ethnic conflict model and an "integration" model. The assumption has been that focusing on the ethnic division necessarily means stressing antagonistic polarity, and that the debate must be between such a model and an opposing one—which transcends the division by arguing that it is, in politics, mainly a function of elite or ruling-class strategies.

Some writers have exaggerated ethnic differences to the point of suggesting that no other cleavages and solidarities are significant, yet ignore the question of how the ethnic conflict has been distinctively patterned and regulated (Scarr 1988; Ravuvu 1988). Other scholars offer more comprehensive accounts of the factors at work in the political process. But in emphasizing the machinations of political elites and social class interests, they greatly understate and simplify the ethnic divide (Howard 1991; Lal 1992; Lawson 1991, 1996; Sutherland 1992). They suggest that ordinary Fijians and Indians are disposed to unite on the basis of shared economic and social interests if only institutions were changed and a new discourse devised for popular mobilization. They depict as a "false" consciousness a division that many observers long acquainted with Fiji know to be profoundly important in popular life.

Thus, two starkly opposed views in political and academic narratives about Fiji have been evident. Events and trends over the last few years confound both and raise questions about the distinctive nature of the ethnic divide and how a national political and social system might be shaped around it. The process of the recent constitutional reform illuminated these issues.

REVIEWING THE CONSTITUTION

The story of the reform is in part the saga of how the coup maker has tried to effect a shift from ethnic champion to national leader. In public discourse it marks a return from the excluding chauvinism of the coups to ideals of complementarity and partnership. The process commenced with a review of the 1990 constitution.

A combination of local and international pressures induced Rabuka and

fellow government leaders to initiate this review in an impartial and thoroughgoing manner. Fiji's rulers were beset by deep contradictions. Most were indigenous Fijians elected by villagers who have few direct contacts with the wider multicultural society and urban-centered economy, or by urban people whose attitudes are also often strongly defined by their ethnicity. The leaders both played on and were constrained by their followers' ethnocentric outlooks, and there was tension between their political dependence on economically backward indigenous constituencies and their responsibility to manage a national economy based largely on the skills and capital of nonindigenous people.

Indian protests against the 1990 constitution were supported by foreign governments (Australia, the United States, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom), which, as aid donors and trade partners, could impose sanctions. Economic problems were already arising from a massive Indian emigration and declining foreign investment. Yet the Indian emigration helped create a Fijian demographic superiority (51 percent to the Indians' 44 percent) that gave the Fijian leaders confidence to agree to reforms. A further incentive was, ironically, the leaders' recognition of the value of Indian allies in the face of Fijian rivals.

In 1994 the governing *Soqosoqo ni Vakavulewa ni Taukei* Party (SVT), led by Rabuka, and the two opposition Indian parties, the National Federation Party and the Labour Party (headed by Jai Ram Reddy), agreed on terms of reference and on the composition of a team to conduct the constitutional review. A former governor-general of New Zealand, Sir Paul Reeves, was made commissioner, and two nominees, one from each of the two major political groups, were appointed his deputies.⁴ They were directed to work with a view to promoting racial harmony, national unity, and the advancement of all communities, giving consideration to the rights and interests of both the indigenous people and other ethnic groups.

In its report, the Constitutional Review Commission (CRC) set a goal to reimagine and transform Fiji by breaking from the racially based political system. It proposed a majority of "open" or common roll seats in Parliament and removal of racial restriction for the office of prime minister. While it rejected the claim that protection of indigenous interests requires their political dominance (recommending instead a principle of "protective paramountcy"), it argued for a continued consultative and veto role for the Fijian Council of Chiefs (Reeves, Lal, and Vakatora 1996; Lal 1997; *Review*, Nov 1996).

Rabuka had initially declared he could accept only a change that

strengthened Fijian control (*Fiji Times*, 12 July 1995, 1). But he now joined Reddy in acclaiming the commission's recommendations and agreeing to discuss them in the hope of arriving at a joint proposal for change. Against the wishes of ethnicist colleagues, he chaired the in-camera bipartisan discussions of the CRC report, and his personal commitment to reform was crucial for the outcome. Neither Reddy nor his more militant rival, Mahendra Chaudhry, called for implementation of all the recommendations, even though they largely met long-standing Indian demands. The Joint Parliamentary Select Committee (JPSC) eventually agreed on details of reform, which were approved by the Council of Chiefs and then endorsed unanimously by both houses of Parliament (JPSC 1997; *Review*, July 1997).

The new constitution introduces 25 common roll seats. But, contrary to the CRC proposal, communal ("racial") seats predominate: 23 (50 percent) for Fijians, 19 (41 percent) for Indians, 3 (7 percent) for General Electors, and 1 (2 percent) for Rotumans.⁵ An innovation for power sharing requires that all parties securing at least 10 percent of seats must be invited to join the cabinet in proportion to their strength. Fiji's president and vice president are to be chosen by the Council of Chiefs, contrary to the CRC proposal that Parliament have this authority (but they need not be Fijians). The citizens at last have a common name: "Fiji Islanders."

The reforms were justified to Fijians as regaining international respect for the country and ensuring a strengthening economy, while enabling Fijians to preserve political control if they guard their unity, especially given the demographic trend. Rabuka also emphasized that, having achieved Fijian security by his coups, his task was now to build the nation for all, especially because Fijian progress depends on that. Most Indian leaders seemed to tacitly concede that Fijian political dominance needs to be maintained for the foreseeable future to ensure stability, and they formed alliances with the major Fijian parties in preparation for the 1999 parliamentary elections. A Labour Party politician confidently remarked to me that much influence could be wielded despite Fijian political leadership, "like the Indian woman who walks behind her husband but actually has great power in the house." The astonishing irony of those elections was the way in which an unprecedented fragmentation of Fijian political leadership, driven partly by popular distrust of the constitutional reform, enabled the Indian-dominated Labour Party to take the lead in forming the first government under the reformed constitution.

Polarized Visions of the Nation: Civic Equality versus Ethnic Difference and Indigenous Power

The constitutional review commenced with public hearings at which more than seven hundred organizations, groups, and individuals presented their views. Most were polarized between two visions of Fiji. Ideals of equality were advanced mainly by Indian petitioners, just as their predecessors had done at the dawn of party politics. Although the popular base for this universalist discourse was overwhelmingly among Indian groups, a few Fijians, mainly associated with Indians in the labor movement, endorsed it, as did some people in minority groups (mainly Europeans, Part-Europeans, and Chinese). The opposing view, asserted mainly by Fijians, and certain Muslim groups seeking special political representation, insisted that realities of ethnic difference, and Fijian claims as the indigenes, must continue to have central place.

This polarity by no means reflected a contrast between “modern” and “traditional” conditions of life. Some of the most ethnicist Fijian petitions were from groups strongly engaged in the urban economy. The most chauvinist of the provincial councils represented Rewa, the province most dependent on the capital city, and one of the strongest defenses of Fijian political dominance and chiefly authority came from a young university lecturer of chiefly rank for the Rewa Youth Provincial Council (CRC-s 007010; CRC-VT vol 1:62ff).

One journal article cannot do justice to the rich diversity of ideas in the CRC archive. I will restrict my survey to elucidating what I see as the major paradigms in public discourse: three ideological constructions of Fiji as a nation, summarized in my conclusion. In the following pages I discuss submissions by several major bodies: the political parties, an urban interethnic “citizens’ forum,” the Methodist Church, the Fijian provincial councils, and several trade unions. I have selected these because they illustrate not just the polarity of the documents as a whole, but also the presence of conciliatory values that facilitated the achievement of an accord. The order in which I discuss the submissions is intended to aid comparison of the various themes.

I devote more space to Fijian than to Indian submissions because they more diversely addressed the most problematic question of accommodating indigenous rights in the multiethnic polity. Also, it is important to give particular attention to such bodies as the Methodist Church and the provincial councils, which are more authoritative organizations for col-

lective interests among Fijians than are the numerous religious and cultural associations for the more individualized Indians.

The Citizens' Constitutional Forum

The problem of reconciling universalist ideals with Fijian insistence on indigenous "paramountcy" was highlighted in the Citizens Constitutional Forum (CCF). This nongovernment body, funded by an international agency, was formed to promote liberal reform. It is a small multiracial group, composed mainly of well-educated and much-traveled middle-class urbanites, including academics, religious leaders (mostly Christian), social workers, and several foreign experts (flown in for conferences). Many live in a cosmopolitan world of local and international meetings on social reform issues. The principals had been ideologues in the early years of the Labour Party and the main spokesperson was an Indian sociologist and pro vice-chancellor at the university. Politicians of all persuasions were invited to the discussions. While the most enthusiastic were Indian leaders, some of Rabuka's ministers attended occasionally.

The CCF activities created a public space for the articulation of human rights principles that were being urged on the government by several foreign embassies. Most participants insisted that these values cannot be compromised to the special pleading of indigenous groups. Their petition to the Constitutional Review Commission proclaimed a vision of equality and unity confidently set against the weight of ethnic division in the country's history and sociology. The underlying assumption was that intelligent people of good will can reason together to design a system that transcends ethnic differences and conflicts: "The integration of world affairs . . . makes it impossible for Fiji to distance itself from international norms. . . . At the heart of our problems lies the lack of a national identity. . . . We need a constitution that builds on our commonalities rather than one that emphasizes our differences. . . . [It] must ensure that we respond to the hurts of history, and that our communities are reconciled" (CRC-VT vol 4, 1 Sep 1995). The petition argued for proportional representation in Parliament, in cabinet, and in other government bodies. While safeguards for Fijian interests in land, traditions, and economic development must be preserved, the Council of Chiefs should have no more than a symbolic position.

The Citizens' Constitutional Forum's difficulty in persuading Fijian agreement reflected the widespread Fijian ambivalence, if not aversion, to the idea of political equality. One of the two most enthusiastic Fijian par-

ticipants was a former Methodist Church president whose multiracial ideals had marginalized him in his church. The other was a young high-ranking chief who, as an industrial arbitrator, worked daily with Indians. He declined a request by other chiefs of his province to help prepare their own petition, and decided that he must separate his CCF work from the Fijian side of his life.

The Fijian Collective

Several Fijians unhappy with the refusal of the citizens' forum to seriously consider the argument for indigenous paramountcy, quietly withdrew to form the "Fijian Collective." They represented a spectrum of views, from urban cosmopolitans to staunch ethnonationalists. Their shared ambivalence toward the CCF project was exemplified by two of the leaders, women with conflicting commitments to a universalism reinforced by involvement in international networks and local interracial women's groups, and to ethnic values compelled partly by a need to work with conservative bodies such as the Fijian Women's Organization (*Soqosoqo Vakamarama*) and the provincial councils. They feared that the extension of universalist principles to political life would, by aggravating Fijian fears, jeopardize the cooperation they were trying to build for empowering women.

The collective's meetings produced a compromise petition that, while calling for a "more democratic" constitution taking account of "internationally recognised principles," also invoked the United Nations Draft Declaration on Rights of Indigenous Peoples to argue that Fijian "sovereignty" must be preserved. It suggested alternative models for different degrees of Fijian predominance, and proposed an "Indian Council" to establish liaison with the Council of Chiefs (CRC-VT vol 4, 12 Sep 1995).

Indian Voices: Universalist Ideals and Communal Realities

Fijian misgivings about the Citizens' Constitutional Forum mirrored the fate of the Labour Party, which, with a Fijian president and many Fijian members at its launching in 1987, had been promoted as the harbinger of a new interracialism. Fijian support had greatly diminished, and at the 1995 convention there was a jarring contrast between its almost entirely Indian male audience and its ethnically and internationally variegated platform of speakers. The event dramatized a tension between the pressures of ethnic politics and the leaders' desire to preserve their original image in the hope that the political climate would change. The party con-

tinued to have a Fijian president on whom the Indian principals rely to symbolize the interracial mission and to make the more aggressive declarations, such as urging Indians to “agitate and demand” their rights (*Fiji Times*, 3 June 1996, 5). (The party regained considerable support from urban Fijians in the 1999 elections.)

Partly on the question of how to defend Indian rights, the Labour Party had fallen into acrimonious rivalry with its more conservative former ally, the National Federation Party (NFP). While both have grassroots support among Indian small farmers, the National Federation Party also depends heavily on Indian business families, some linked with Fijian politicians, whereas the Labour Party has support in some of the urban trade unions. The parties reunited on the issue of constitutional reform. Their joint petition decried discrimination against Indians and, like the Citizens’ Constitutional Forum, affirmed the goal of nation making on the basis of internationally accepted principles of human rights: “Ever since the advent of colonialism, our people have been trained to think along communal lines. . . . We were fed stereotypes: Indians as crafty, greedy, and individualist—and indigenous Fijians as lazy, unable to come to terms with modernisation, lacking the incentive and skills for economic enterprise. . . . The test of the statesmanship of our [leaders] . . . is the extent to which they are willing to provide guidance to the people to move away from preoccupations with race” (NFP-Labour Party submission p 7; CRC-VT vol 3, 24 Aug 1995, 64). The call for equality was central in most petitions from Indian religious and cultural bodies, together with an emphasis on both the Indians’ contribution to Fiji’s development and the need to protect Fijian interests. Both of these bodies—national and local—usually echoed the political parties. Hindu organizations such as the Arya Samaj and the TISI Sangam stressed their long-standing commitment to promoting interracial understanding as demonstrated by the many Fijians in their schools.

Some Muslim groups and individuals revived an old demand for special representation in Parliament along with the preservation of Fijian political dominance. The Muslim Political Rights Movement declared fears of “political and economic genocide” and threatened to take the question to the United Nations (CRC-VT vol 4, 12 Sep 1995). The Muslim League called for “a de-linking of Fiji’s Muslims from the erroneous racial label of ‘Indian’ imposed [on them] by the colonial regime” (CRC-S 006064). But these views did not appear to have strong support in the Islamic community, although the governing Fijian party (the SVT) endorsed the concept of separate Muslim seats. While the issue has long

been present, sometimes amplified in parliamentary elections, shared Indian interests in Fiji, and the Muslims' small numbers, have minimized its political impact.

The coalition of Indian parties, whose leaders include Muslims, called for a parliament with a majority of seats elected on the basis of proportionate representation of political parties without racial restrictions. In contrast to the Citizens' Constitutional Forum, however, they advocated a strong position for the Council of Chiefs, compromising the human rights principles for the sake of "national unity and harmony": "The *Bose Levu Vakaturaga* has an important role in healing racial wounds. . . . [It] should be given a special constitutional responsibility to encourage the growth of multiracialism and national unity."

There was an interesting tension in the National Federation Party between the ideals affirmed in the submission and a concern voiced by some party leaders that a strong element of communal representation should be preserved to safeguard Indian interests, especially in view of the increasing Fijian demographic majority (CRC-VT vol 1, 4 July 1995, 76). In the words of one leader: "Communalism is so deeply embedded in our people. . . . These practical considerations have to be taken into account" (Harish Sharma, CRC-VT vol 1, 5 July 1995). Reddy himself lamented to the Constitutional Review Commission: "The truth is we are not a nation. We are many nations compressed into these islands." He admitted there was "deep-seated suspicion and distrust" among Fiji's leaders, in part a legacy of colonial rule. "Until 1970 we had an intermediary [the colonial administration] between the two communities. . . . [It] is a relatively new experience having to relate to each other . . . hampered also because we are cultural strangers, we do not know our neighbours, we do not know their language, we do not know their value system" (CRC-VT vol 3, 24 Aug 1995, 5ff). As the reform process concluded nearly two years later, one of Reddy's deputies would declare that "we cannot risk the future of the Indian community on the untested waters of open seats" (*Fiji Times*, 10 May 1997, 24).

The tacit caution against too radical a change to the electoral system, from fear that communal interests might lose their protection, facilitated eventual agreement with Fijian leaders. In contrast with earlier phases of national political life, when Indian leaders had demanded common roll elections to confirm their equal rights as citizens (Norton 1990, ch 5), Fijian insistence on strong communal representation was now more compatible with the Indians' own concerns. But the issue divided Labour

Party principals. While some readily agreed with the decision of the Joint Parliamentary Select Committee, pleased especially with the human rights clauses, their parliamentary leader, Mahendra Chaudhry, condemned its rejection of the CRC proposal for the electoral system. There was also a contrast between abrasive statements from the NFP president, against Fijian leaders and culture (Balwant Singh Rakha, CRC-VT vol 2, 20 July 1995, 22), and the conciliatory rhetoric of Reddy, the NFP parliamentary leader, who urged his followers to understand Fijian fears. Reddy's stance, clearly favored by his party, was reinforced by the petition of a party elder, one of Fiji's leading businessmen (Vinod Patel, CRC-VT vol 2, 20 July 1995, 36ff).

The Labour-NFP petition was more restrained than those Chaudhry produced for an Indian farmers' union and for the Public Servants' Association (CRC-S 28 Aug, 4 Sep 1995). Some other Indian petitions were equally strident: "this horrible, iniquitous and . . . apartheid constitution" (Maan Singh CRC-S 011001); "the public funds racially allocated under the 1990 constitution should be viewed as Fijians conquering the fruits of Indian sweat" (Mahila Manch, a women's organization, CRC-S 024055B). Numerous petitions emphasized the Indians' special claims as the people who had "developed" the land: "the constitution is trying to suppress the race which has made Fiji beautiful and economical . . . the Indian race, especially the hard-working farmers" (Hindu priest, CRC-VT vol 2, 20 July 1995, 88). The NFP Youth Wing asserted that "the role Indians played in the history of Fiji will never ever be matched by any other races" (CRC-S 007012).

The most forceful statement came from the university-based Fiji Youth and Students League. It condemned "Fijian racialism" and warned of the possibility of retaliatory violence: "The notion of (Fijian) supremacy is nothing other than . . . oppression of other races . . . a naked display of racism by a people which claims to be Christian" (CRC-S 006028). The League's women's wing denounced the constitution as a "detestable document only worthy of incineration; . . . a shame on the people of Fiji . . . entrenching complete subjugation of the Indo-Fijian community" (CRC-S 010006).

The Ruling Party: Soqosoqo ni Vakavulewa ni Taukei

Continued subjugation of the Indians was indeed demanded by the governing SVT Party. Titled "Respect and Understanding—Fijian Sovereignty: The Recipe for Peace, Stability, and Progress," the petition was

produced by a small group of Rabuka's ministers drawing on commissioned "research papers" and assisted by a Fiji Muslim educator (former ambassador to Malaysia) and by a legal expert on loan from the Malaysian government.

Like the Citizens' Constitutional Forum and the Labour-NFP Coalition, the SVT invoked "internationally recognised principles," its authority being the UN Draft Resolution on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Although the petition insisted that "the paramountcy of Fijian interests in governance [need] not be in conflict with . . . rights of citizenship of other communities," much of the text is a disdainfully patronizing and sometimes antagonistic exposition of the relationship between *taukei* and *vulagi*, a concept in traditional Fijian society that has long been extrapolated to discourse about interethnic relations:

Fijians have always categorised the inhabitants of the country, or of any locality or village, into two main divisions: a person is either a *taukei* (indigenous owner) or *vulagi* (visitor or foreigner) in any place. . . . The *Taukei* are normally at the forefront in decision making. The *vulagi* are allowed to participate . . . but they must not be domineering or forceful. . . . Whilst they are welcome to stay and enjoy the fruits of their labour, . . . they need to be reminded time and time again of this fact The *taukei* and *vulagi* concept, host/guest relationship, continues to be challenged and upset by . . . the human rights concept in which all are considered equal. (CRC-S 10 Oct 1995; CRC-VT vol 4)⁶

Although this view is widely held by Fijians, the concept has different phrasings and inflections. The rhetoric can be conciliatory and indulgent rather than disdainful and exclusionary. This variation allows a flexibility in interethnic attitudes evident in other Fijian petitions discussed shortly. Suffice here to note the contrast with the submission from one of Rabuka's cabinet ministers, Ratu Jo Nacola. A traditional chief and former academic, he concluded by suggesting "a new paradigm of multi-ethnic relations. . . . We should perhaps look at the *taukei* as the gracious host who is mindful of the interests of other communities . . . the honoured guests." He refrained from using the word *vulagi*, and emphasized that "it is not the Fijian way . . . to impose one's view without regard for others. . . . The ethnic issue must be approached from the ethical chiefly Fijian standpoint" (CRC-S 014001).

The SVT linked the *taukei-vulagi* theme with an insistence on the

authority of the Council of Chiefs and the claimed basis for this in Fijian Christianity and the Deed of Cession: "The people of Fiji . . . must acknowledge that the *Bose Levu Vaka Turaga* is . . . the supreme forum of this land and . . . the fount of power, mercy, and honour. [Acknowledgment of this] by all . . . is in harmony with the Christian beliefs of the indigenous people . . . that there is no power but of God, and that the powers that be are ordained by God" (CRC-S, 10 Oct 1995, 11). The governing party went beyond insisting on Indian subordination to bluntly declare Fijian resentment and distrust: "Fijians fear that Indians do wish political domination. . . . [They] have shown no signs of cultural assimilation or sensitivity. Most gave the impression of caring little about Fijian culture and social values. . . . At best Fijians were 'nice people,' friendly, simple, and a little lazy. . . . 'Junglis' or 'savages,' naive, foolish and poor, were other common epithets. . . . That is a typical [Indian] viewpoint, and there was more than a hint of a feeling of cultural superiority and arrogance" (CRC-S, 10 Oct 1995, 58ff).

The leaking of the document to the press on the eve of the principal Hindu festival and during celebrations of Fiji's twenty-five years of independence as a nation-state seemed a cruel irony. Diwali affirms a spirit of joyful renewal and friendship toward people of other faiths. It is marked by a national holiday, and Fijians and others often share in the occasion, at work and in the homes of Indian friends and neighbors. Reddy despondently enjoined celebrants at the main function in Suva to bear their burden with dignity and to look critically within themselves before condemning others. They must carry on in hope, and work "to overcome the bigotry and hatred around us." It was remarkable restraint at a moment of deep offense. The hurt was angrily voiced in Parliament by one of Reddy's colleagues: "The SVT submission was . . . insulting, arrogant, and oozed racial chauvinism."⁷

Rabuka insisted that his party "had to honestly report [the] views of people at the grassroots." While Indians must understand the popular distrust, they should not "overreact," for the government and the Fijian people "do not want to oppress them or drive them out." This was just the beginning of the constitutional reform, and the commissioners would "hopefully produce a report that will be a basis for dialogue and compromise" (*Fiji Times*, 7 Oct 1995, 1). But even as the commissioners began their work, Rabuka himself had encouraged "grassroots" chauvinism by declaring that he believed Fijian dominance must be preserved.

The Methodist Church

Preserving ethnic dominance was the central theme in most Fijian petitions, often justified in terms of Fijian Christianity: God made Fiji for the Fijians, just as He had allocated other lands to other "races." Christianity had transformed Fijians from barbarity, setting them above people of other faiths, and Christian Fijians must have preeminence in the land. Many leaders in the Methodist Church, to which about 60 percent of Fijians belong, have been staunch ethnonationalists supporting the Fijian National Party and the Taukei Movement. After Rabuka's coups they strongly prevailed over moderate colleagues. Their submission on the constitution was no less ethnicist than the SVT's, though without the same disdain and rebuke. The presenter, then church president and Rabuka's close ally, was backed by a large body of supporters spilling into the corridors of the parliament building. The petition endorsed the existing constitution and demanded that the Council of Chiefs have authority "to ensure the absolute control over this nation by the *i Taukei*." "The Fijians are not here to negotiate, but to reassert their authentic position . . . that governance rights are solely theirs—for the simple fact that they, as the original inhabitants of this land, are the true owners. . . . The Deed of Cession saw only a temporary transfer of those rights to the British Crown. . . . The Deed was also a covenant between the Fijians and the Lord Jesus Christ. . . . [Therefore] the Fijians . . . can declare this nation a Christian state. . . . [But] Christianity makes the Fijians tolerant and accommodating" (CRC-S, 18 Sep 1995; CRC-VT vol 4). While the SVT has relied on Methodist leaders to mobilize voters, the same leaders organized public protests against the SVT government for abolishing the post-coup prohibition on business and sport on Sundays. The banners of street marchers early in 1995 had proclaimed: "Rabuka—Judas Escariot!" "Don't Trade Sunday for Money," "Don't Rob Us of Our Identity."

The Cakobau Family

The Methodist petition was supported by the most symbolically important Fijian family, the Cakobaus. As descendants of the chief primarily responsible for Fijian conversion to Christianity and for the Deed of Cession, they represent Fijian claims to privilege and power. As well, they symbolize the identity of Fijian chiefs as the patrons of nonindigenous settlers and ultimate guarantors of the social order. Through its two spokeswomen, the clan insisted that the constitution "must enshrine the paramountcy of Fijian interests" and that Fiji be declared a Christian

nation: “While we appreciate the democratic arguments of equal rights, we also realise that such a liberal tradition . . . will gradually take away our ownership and governance rights. . . . The paramountcy of Fijian interests is an issue that Fijians cannot be made to apologise about. It does not mean that Fijians will impose their own way of life or religion on the non-indigenous” (CRC-S 007002).

The Provincial Councils

Similar declarations issued from most of the fourteen provincial councils, which, apart from the Methodist Church, are the only organized voice of the majority of village Fijians. But in no case was the rhetoric of these “grassroots” bodies antagonistic toward Indians in the manner of the SVT. The petitions often insisted that political leadership would give Fijians the security to care for the needs of others. Several affirmed a benevolent interpretation of the *tauvei-vulagi* theme, emphasizing the Fijians’ obligation “in the traditional and chiefly way” to care for their guests in the land: “The *Tauvei* customs emphasize the importance of sharing and caring, . . . Dominating others who are *vulagi* is not in keeping with the *Tauvei* concept” (Kadavu Provincial Council, CRC-S 022003). The message was reinforced by an emphasis on Fijian Christianity: “[The] generosity and goodwill of our chiefs and Indigenous People, as a result of Christian upbringing, has made possible the leasing of Fijian land . . . [and] has contributed to . . . progress in the country” (Naitasiri Provincial Council, CRC-S 012001).

In several provinces that had strongly supported the SVT in elections, the submissions were relatively mild (Cakaudrove and Bua, CRC-VT vol 3; Macuata CRC-S No. 016019); two are predominantly Fijian areas where Indians have a marginal presence in everyday life. In most provinces where support for the SVT had been considerably weaker (rival Fijian candidates being favored) the submissions were more ethnicist—all on the main island where interaction with Indians is more frequent, along with more competition for jobs and greater pressure on land (CRC-S 006102 Tailevu, 006103 Serua, 024061B Ba).

Only the Lau Islands, an almost exclusively Fijian place led by Fiji’s president, Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, did not demand ethnic paramountcy. Rather, the Lau petition, partly Mara’s work, argued that the increasing Fijian demographic majority made it safe to have common roll seats (CRC-S 023001).⁸

The Fijian Association Party

Lau had become a base of opposition to Rabuka's government through support for the Fijian Association Party (FAP), a breakaway from the SVT formed by the late Josevata Kamikamica, Mara's political protégé who rivaled Rabuka for the office of prime minister. The FAP petition condemned the constitution as "counterproductive both for promoting cohesion among Fijians, and a sense of national direction among all races." But it also wanted Fijian dominance preserved in parliament (CRC-S, July 1995). The leadership represented a spectrum of opinion, from liberal democratic to ethnonationalist. The followers are mostly in the villages where the party depends on provincial sentiments. Even its urban support reflected these particularistic loyalties more than cross-ethnic interests of social class and urban life; urban support for the more ethnicist SVT Party was far stronger.

The Trade Unions

Some urban Fijian petitions were even more ethnicist than the SVT's. The joint submission from the Taukei Movement and the Fijian dockworkers wanted an exclusively Fijian and Rotuman parliament and Fiji to be declared a Christian state, alleging that in agreeing to the independence constitution of 1970, the British Government and the Fijian leaders had "betrayed the trust placed in them by the Founding Fathers of the Fijian Nation," the chiefs who signed the Deed of Cession (CRC-S 006107; cf Rutz 1995, 87). Another urban Taukei Movement petitioner rebuked Indians who opposed Fijian political dominance ("they do not know the effect that has on the grass-roots people") and blamed Rabuka's coup "for preempting the violence which was supposed to escalate into civil war" (CRC-VT vol 2, 19 July 1995, 23). But the Taukei Movement does not have a strong base in the trade unions, which since the 1950s have been the principal domain of interethnic solidarity.

Some union petitions reflected the importance of shared interests. Even the predominantly Fijian and Rotuman nurses' union, whose former leader had become president of the Labour Party, called for "equality and democracy" (CRC-S 024052B). The Fiji Trades Union Congress (FTUC) demanded an end to discriminatory legislation other than to protect special land and cultural interests of the Fijians: Fiji must create a constitution that ensures the political stability needed for economic growth, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights "must be the cornerstone."

However, the FTUC principals urged the Constitutional Review Commission to arrive at recommendations that would have a general “acceptability” (CRC-VT vol 4, 12 Sep 1995). Their caution reflected a recognition of the ambiguous political potential in class formation, and the threat posed by national political controversy to labor solidarity.

Trade unions have sometimes been arenas of ethnic antagonism, exemplified by occasional Fijian breakaways from multiethnic organizations. The military coups encouraged the Viti Civil Servants’ Association, which had split off from the Public Servants Association. Its petition invoked the familiar *taukei-vulagi* rhetoric: “The Fijians regard themselves as the owner of Fiji in the same way the owner of a house protects his interests in his house,” and they do not respond favorably to tenants “who demand equal rights with the owner” (CRC-S 006012).

Yet ethnic division in the union movement does not always mean enmity. The Fijian Teachers’ Association presented one of the most liberal petitions, reflecting its regular collaboration with the mainly Indian Fiji Teachers’ Union. The cooperation had been temporarily broken by the coup. But now the Fijian union rejected the 1990 constitution as just an interim measure: “In their wisdom, the authors . . . saw the need to write a document that would contain the feelings and concerns of the indigenous Fijians” and provide time “for racial feelings to settle.” That time had passed and there was need for a new constitution to “gain the widest national and international acceptance.” Echoing the petitions of the Citizens’ Constitutional Forum, the Fiji Trades Union Congress, and the Indian political parties, the Fijian Teachers’ Union opposed “discriminatory practices” and called for “democracy and equality”—though communal seats should be retained “as the best way of meeting the special needs of different groups” (CRC-S 006011).

RECONCILING ETHNICITY AND NATION

The texts produced for the constitutional review reflected the contrasting values, pressures, and opportunities of the three arenas in which the political process in Fiji has long been shaped: the ethnic, the national, and the international. The polar extremes starkly represented by the Citizens’ Constitutional Forum and the SVT are based largely in international and local ethnic domains of values respectively. Many other petitions, including those of most Indian organizations and some of the Fijian provincial councils, expressed the concept of a national domain, a public culture,

centering on respect for difference and recognition of indigenous rights. However, the Indian submissions almost unanimously called for common roll elections, whereas most Fijian submissions insisted on preserving communal representation with a majority of Fijian seats.

The dominant publicly declared Indian vision has been shaped by the democratic ideology of the anticolonial movement brought from India in the 1920s, by the individualization of Indian life in Fiji's economy, and by the trade union ideology adopted from the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand. By contrast, the Fijians' political values and expectations have been conditioned by the persistence of "communal" and hierarchical values and relationships, reinforced by tensions with Indians who from the 1940s to the 1980s outnumbered them. The concern in most Fijian petitions with ethnic group control and cultural identity was consistent with the fact that Fijians cherish political and cultural strength as a counterweight to non-Fijian economic power.

The liberal democratic theme linked the petitions of most Indian political and cultural organizations, the urban citizens' forum, some trade unions, and many religious bodies (Muslim, Christian, and Hindu) whose petitions have not been discussed.⁹ Yet most Indian petitions also agreed to safeguards for Fijian interests (land and culture). Many wanted the office of president reserved for Fijians and the Council of Chiefs to continue to have a position of authority, a few suggesting a "council of Indian leaders" to liaise with it. Moreover, some Indian leaders were disposed by their own ethnic concerns to favor the continuance of a strong element of communal representation.

While Indians generally accept Fijian landed privilege and political safeguards, most reject the Fijians' equation of *taukei* rights with constitutionally guaranteed control of the state. The only Indians who defended the Fijian rhetoric about house owner and tenant were the very few petitioners seeking separate political representation for Muslims. But Indian submissions rarely expressed ideas of racial superiority and antagonism, though these were common in Fijian petitions.¹⁰

Although the vast majority of Fijian petitions called for political supremacy, there were contrasting formulations. Submissions from many individuals, clans, and organizations voiced antagonism toward Indians, insisting on their subordination to rightful indigenous power. But some submissions argued for accommodation in a constitution under which politically dominant Fijians had responsibility to the needs of immigrant

peoples: an asymmetrical partnership for the good of the nation rather than a chauvinist domination for indigenous rights.

The concept of such a partnership, enunciated in the *taukei-vulagi* rhetoric and Fijian Christianity, gives cultural reinforcement to an inter-ethnic complementarity in Fiji's political economy. This is often affirmed in public statements. During a speech to Fijian villagers within weeks of his first coup, Rabuka had asked them to explain to "our fellow countrymen, the Indians" that he was not trying to chase them out of Fiji: "They were a gift from God to help us in the development of our country. . . . Their coming has been a great blessing. . . . All the good things we have enjoyed, including the Indians, came about through the acceptance of God, His faith and light, by our chiefs" (*Nai Lalakai*, 16 July 1987, 6–7). One of Rabuka's ministers later reaffirmed this message in sympathizing with Indian anxiety for their leases: "The Indians were brought to this country under the divine plan of the Almighty to help build it through the sugar industry. This has been enabled through the generosity of the indigenous race, who readily made their land available" (FHR, 30 June 1993, 207). During a constitutional review after the coup, a religious leader had cautioned that to write off the Indians would invite God's wrath: "The Bible warns us, as it warned the people of Israel: When an alien lives in your land, do not mistreat him. . . . Love him as yourself. . . . To deny leases to other races would not be pleasing to God" (1987 Constitutional Review, Verbal Transcript, 1132). In similar vein fifty years earlier, Ratu Sukuna had persuaded his fellow chiefs to agree to centralized control over the leasing of land to Indian farmers (Norton 1999). Many petitioners in 1995 expounded on a link between chiefly authority, Fijian power in government, and caring in a Christian way for others.

The governing SVT party entered the constitution debate as uncompromising defender of Fijian supremacy. This stance reflected perceived strategic imperatives in the face of pressures from both Fijian ethnonationalists and Indian democrats. SVT leaders wanted to reassure Fijians of their commitment to the promise of the coups, and to be "utterly honest and frank" to Indians about Fijian feelings. Their submission forcefully articulated a popular view of the ethnic difference and pleased Taukei Movement leaders with whom several SVT principals were linked. Yet the SVT leaders formed a wide spectrum of dispositions—from a few hard-liners to several strongly inclined to reform. While some intended to con-

tinue to oppose substantial change (and did so, even helping Taukei leaders to write protests against the final CRC report¹¹), others saw advantage in an initial position that would enable them to hold their ground as ethnic champions during the review, yet allow room for an eventual compromise. Agreement to concessions at the start would leave them vulnerable to ethnicist challenges over a lengthy period, perhaps jeopardizing hope of significant reform.

Whenever they indicated a willingness to consider Indian grievances, Rabuka and his less reactionary colleagues drew protests from hardliners.¹² Yet all SVT leaders have exploited ethnic chauvinism. Rabuka often stressed the danger of militant action if Fijians felt their power threatened. In 1994 he warned that if his party was not reelected there might be violence from outraged supporters: peace and stability depended on his rule. The SVT petition extended this political "gaming" by marking an ethnicist baseline from which the leaders might eventually edge toward compromise, winning approval from Indians perhaps for even moderate concessions.

The final agreement went much further than most Indian leaders dared hope. Nonetheless, the reform process highlighted tension between Reddy's greater readiness to compromise the universalist ideals with the ethnic concerns of the domestic arena, and his rival Chaudhry's call for a majority of common roll seats and threats to bring international pressure to bear on the Fijian rulers. In part the NFP leaders' conciliatory stance reflected the influence of leading businesspeople and their particular concern for political stability. Several wealthy party backers have business ties with SVT leaders and some NFP politicians have friendly working relations with SVT cabinet ministers. Even the principal author and presenter of the SVT petition has business links, on behalf of his provincial council, with a major Indian company whose owner is an NFP elder. Thus the initial SVT anti-reform rhetoric, and the Indian condemnation of it, belied a mutuality of interest between these Fijian and Indian elites. Indeed, the two parties have collaborated in town elections and farmers' council elections, and formed an alliance for the 1999 parliamentary elections.

Accommodating the pressures of ethnic and national arenas of leadership has long been a defining feature of politics in Fiji. Political and ideological tensions have inevitably afflicted Fijians leading a multiethnic country with a relatively developed economy from mainly communal and economically backward constituencies. In handling these tensions, lead-

ers of chiefly status, who dominated until the army coups, have been advantaged by the grounding of their legitimacy in their titular rank within Fijian groups. There is less political imperative for chiefs to engage in chauvinist rhetoric than there tends to be for commoner leaders. Moreover, the accommodation of group difference and conflict from a position of sanctified authority and strength is part of the traditional chiefly role.

Rabuka and most of his fellow SVT leaders are commoners, including three of the five men who produced the SVT petition. An initial obstacle to reform was the fact that Rabuka's legitimacy as ethnic leader is entirely his personal charisma as the coup maker who promised Fijian power—the heroic *bati* (warrior) defending the *vanua* (land and community) and its chiefs against the threat of domination by the *vulagi* (“foreigners”). However, during the constitutional reform process he had no serious rival for popular Fijian support, and it could perhaps be argued that his proven credentials as ethnic champion helped him at that time to withstand Fijian opposition to his compromising with Indian leaders.

To this end Rabuka also skillfully used the flexible political resource of Fijian Christianity. He had originally insisted that his coup fulfilled God's wish that the indigenous people must rule their land (on this “strategy of divine intervention” see Rutz 1995, 84–87). When campaigning for village votes several years later, he suggested that perhaps the “multiracialism” advocated by Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara was against God's wish: “We've been living together but we are still different. . . . We will never be the same. Because that's the will of God” (Norton 1994, 50). But near the end of the reform process, he declared expansively at a religious festival in Suva that “we all must change!” and expounded on his vision of a united nation, which “we can realise through the guidance of Christ” (Rabuka 1997). He later condemned “anti-Indian” rhetoric from certain Fijian political groups: “The Bible teaches us that we must love our neighbour. . . . That is what the new constitution is all about” (*Daily Post*, 1 Nov 1998). A moderating pressure on Rabuka now was a change in Methodist Church leadership: the new president's views, in contrast to those of his predecessor, are close to the vision of the Citizens' Constitutional Forum.

Rabuka's most crucial resource for achieving reform, however, was his ability, with Ratu Mara's help, to secure the approval of the Council of Chiefs of which he was chairman. The chiefs had declined to endorse the SVT petition (due partly to pressure from Mara and his wife, both high-

ranking chiefs). Nor did they make a submission of their own. Their major part in the reform process, after some initial resistance, was to ratify the final JPSC proposal.

THE ROLE OF THE CHIEFS IN POLITICAL INTEGRATION

I have argued elsewhere that management of ethnic conflict has been favored by the dual roles of leading chiefs, and of the Council of Chiefs, as both rallying points for Fijian ethnic unity in opposition to Indians and as controllers of militant ethnonationalism and conciliators in ethnic relations (Norton 1990, 1999). This paradoxical duality of the chiefs has been missed by historians and political scientists who view them mainly in terms of vested elite interests and their part in sustaining ethnic division (Howard 1991; Lal 1992; Sutherland 1992; Lawson 1996, 1997). While the anthropologists Kaplan (1995a) and Rutz (1995) have given more nuanced accounts of chiefship, they, too, have missed the chiefs' significance outside the Fijian context other than as a factor in the ethnic opposition. I suggest that in the long term the chiefs' contribution in the national political arena is not as a privileged "vested interest" group obstructing a solution to the problem of establishing a viable democratic polity, but as *part* of this solution.

The collective legitimacy of high chiefs as ethnic group leaders was seen by the colonial rulers and most Fijians to reside ultimately in the chiefs' pivotal role in Fiji's relationship to the British Crown. The Deed of Cession, by which leading chiefs gave the islands to Queen Victoria, signified to Fijians that the British "held them high," and the chiefs, in their collective authority in colonial institutions, embodied this reassuring bond; (for a discussion of these "royalist" chiefs see Rutz 1995).¹³ The Fijians' deepening sense of conflict with the growing Indian population, especially during the last thirty years of colonial rule, reinforced the chiefs' identity as ethnic group protectors.

Yet the chiefs' dominance of ethnic leadership also supported colonial policies that advanced Indians and others, but not most Fijians, in the modern economy. This aspect of chiefly power encouraged some commoner leaders to accuse the leading chiefs of betraying their people (Norton 1990, 111–116; Rutz 1995). Although the chiefs' privileged authority contravened the equalitarian ideals in Indian political discourse, the chiefs became a support for Indian welfare by agreeing to make much of

the best Fijian land a national resource for commercial lease, by restricting a competing movement of Fijians into commercial farming, and by restraining the very potential for Fijian ethnonationalism that their decisions in support of non-Fijian interests helped generate (Norton 1986, 1999). There has thus been a tension between the Indians' liberal democratic ideology, and the political conditions in Fiji under which they have achieved economic advantages.

The Council of Chiefs, still viewed by Fijians as the protective mantle of their culture and society, enhances Fijian convictions of strength in relation to other ethnic groups in a manner that has encouraged their acceptance of concessions their leaders make. In their institutional status and authority, the chiefs have no need for militant "taukeism" to affirm their role as ethnic leaders. The taukeists, on the other hand, have not been able to construct a politically effective discourse about Fijian identity independently of the ideology of chiefship. Indeed, militant ethnonationalism has had its most powerful moment in a protest movement defending chiefly authority after the defeat of Ratu Mara's government in 1987.

At the height of his coercive power as coup maker, Rabuka relied on the chiefs to legitimate a new government. Later, at Mara's suggestion, the Council of Chiefs authorized the formation of the SVT Party. While that party's leaders point to the increasing prominence of commoners in government as one of their achievements, the chiefly sponsorship of the party remained the principal basis of its legitimacy for Fijians, about 60 percent of whom supported it in the 1992 and 1994 elections. Rabuka has often sought to validate his actions as SVT leader by invoking the chiefs' mandate. While in the 1999 elections the SVT support was reduced to just 34 percent of votes in the Fijian communal electorates, its major rival Fijian parties also emphasized their chiefly support.

In her writings on competing discourses about Fijian identity and rights, Kaplan has focused on contradictions between chiefly authority as it was modified and strengthened in official institutions under colonial rule, and traditional values emphasizing a reciprocity between "stranger" chiefs and "the people of the land" (Kaplan 1993, 1995a, 1995b; see also Rutz's discussion of "royalist" chiefs and their opponents who accused them of a "betrayal of the land"). Although such tension is sometimes reflected in Fijian complaints about chiefs enjoying privileges while neglecting the *vanua* (community), it has not been a significant force in contemporary politics.¹⁴ The petitioner who proposed a "Council of Com-

moners" to check the tendency for chiefs to neglect the needs of their *vanua* is an urban intellectual who has attracted little popular interest (Francis Sokonibogi, CRC-S 006015; *Daily Post*, 17, 18 Jan 1995). That indigenous Fijian petitions to the Constitutional Review Commission rarely questioned the importance of the chiefs is attributable at least partly to the fact that while chiefs long ago lost their legal authority to direct everyday life, chiefly hierarchy continues to be a central element in the meanings and ceremonial practices that constitute Fijian group identities.¹⁵

The process of constitutional reform suggests that chiefship is a strengthening value in the interethnic public domain. Agreement that the Council of Chiefs should retain powers in the national polity was a theme linking a wide range of submissions, ameliorating the conflict of ideological extremes (from the Methodist Church and the SVT, to the NFP-Labour coalition and numerous other Indian bodies).¹⁶ During the JPSC talks a Council of Chiefs committee was regularly briefed and consulted by the Fijian participants. Though initially opposing change to the electoral system, the full council agreed at the persuasion of Rabuka and Ratu Mara, and after hearing an appeal from Jai Ram Reddy. It was the first time an Indian had addressed the chiefs, and Reddy's speech, in which he spoke rhetorically of them as the chiefs "not just of the indigenous Fijians but of all the people of Fiji," was widely acclaimed as a defining event in the quest to make a national political community (Norton 1999).¹⁷

While the chiefs' approval was certainly a critical part of the reform process, it did not resolve the conflict that Fijian leaders face between ethnicist pressures and the imperatives of interethnic compromise. Some chiefs were criticized in their own provincial councils for agreeing to a sell-out and for allowing an Indian to address them. Rabuka was rebuked by some members of his provincial council for compromising with Indian leaders, who, it was alleged, had manipulated him into supporting their demands. In fact many of the Fijian provincial councils opposed the JPSC proposals.

Reddy was accused by his Indian opponents of striking a deal with Rabuka to reverse the ratio of communal and common roll seats proposed by the Constitutional Review Commission (Mahendra Chaudhry, *Fiji Times*, 24 April 1997, 6). A vandal attack on a Hindu temple during the week of the parliamentary debate on the reform, provoking an angry outburst from one Indian speaker, symbolized the fragility of the rapprochement (FHR, 23 July 1997, 75ff).

CONCLUSION

Fiji's modern political history has been marked by a recurring pattern of crisis and conciliation: crises that while accentuating ethnic conflict, have also presented new contexts for dialogue and accommodation. A famous debate on "safeguarding the Fijian race," provoked in the colonial parliament in 1946 by European leaders antagonistic to Indian aspirations, expressed heightened tensions, yet ended in a unanimous agreement on the importance of protecting indigenous interests as the non-Fijian population and economic strength grew (Norton 1977, 39-40). Twenty years later, a mobilization of Fijian militancy encouraged a rapprochement that helped end colonial rule (Norton 1990, 100-106). That episode was marked by tension between a universalist ideology of political equality with its main supports in discourses, governments, and organizations outside Fiji, and the constraints of the domestic arena where a principle of indigenous paramountcy had become established in conjunction with the emerging role of leading chiefs and the Council of Chiefs in interethnic accommodation. Tension between these two influences characterized Indian leadership from the 1930s, when the issue of lease access to Fijian land began to outweigh the grievance against European political privilege.

The same contradiction between an international ideology of human unity and equality, and the reality of a local conjunction of difference and complementarity in ethnic relations marked the recent dialogue leading to constitutional reform. The contending ideological constructions of the nation showed a continuity with those of the late colonial period that I have documented in earlier work, particularly the opposition between a universalist conception stressing shared interests of "the people" artificially divided by colonial elites, and a view of Fiji that emphasizes both the ethnic division and the possibilities for accommodation on the basis of a special political position for the indigenous Fijians (Norton 1977, 21-24; 1990, 76-77, 102).

Kaplan has described "competing cultural visions of . . . a 'national' polity" in the aftermath of the army coups (1993, 36, 52-53; 1995a). Her discussion centers on the opposition between a "Fijianist" vision, upheld by Rabuka, and Indian populist and class narratives about interests shared across ethnic difference. But Kaplan's account of the possibilities for defining a national order was inevitably limited by the unprecedented ethnic antagonism of those years. The process of rapprochement I have

described has highlighted *three* distinct paradigms for nation making. While all have sources in colonial times, an accommodative vision mediating the two extremes is now strengthened.

One extreme is the Fijian ethnonationalist vision based on an antagonistic, exclusionary interpretation of indigenous rights. It is a popular view among Fijians, articulated most forcefully by the Fijian National Party and the Taukei Movement. However, the politically destabilizing potential in chauvinist discourse has been limited by the difficulty ethnonationalist leaders have in defining a distinctive Fijian identity independently of the ideals and institutions of chiefship. It is to Fiji's advantage in the project of nation building that the possibility for Fijian leaders to seek popular support by competing to construct an antagonistic form of ethnic identity has been restricted by the persisting force of the essentially inward-looking (rather than oppositional) communal and hierarchical values and relationships of Fijian group life (Norton 1993a, 1993b).

Of greater weight in national life is the mediating concept of political inequality supporting a partnership across difference. Recognition of the prerogative of Fijian chiefs in the Council of Chiefs is central to this concept, together with a reciprocal responsibility of indigenous people to meet the needs of the nonindigenous. The Indians' dependence on Fijian lands has historically been the major material foundation for this vision of ethnic relations, but the interests of the Indian business community have also encouraged it.

The opposite extreme to Fijian ethnonationalism is the concept of homogeneous citizenship emphasizing common interests and equality of rights, and minimizing the importance of difference. This conception of the nation has its source particularly in the local impact of international human rights discourse and in the growth of the trade union movement with its international links. It is advanced mainly by Indians, and has been privileged in much academic writing and by the Constitutional Review Commission.

While the JPSC agreement, on which the new constitution is based, endorses most of the human rights principles urged by the Constitutional Review Commission, it affirms most strongly the second of the above visions. It preserves an emphasis on difference in political representation and secures indigenous prerogatives, placing the Council of Chiefs in a stronger position than under the independence constitution by giving it authority to choose the president and vice president and to control nearly half the seats in the upper house. One high-ranking chief, a young cos-

mopolitan professional, remarked to me on the paradox of this new prominence when chiefs have been losing dominance within Fijian communities under the impact of urbanization and education.¹⁸

Foreign diplomatic pressures, demographic change, and economic recession encouraged Fijian political leaders to agree to change, but the most crucial factor for the reform was the containment of the ethnonationalist sentiment that those leaders themselves had helped foment. Their ability to control this threat to their reaching a compromise depended ultimately on their influence in the Council of Chiefs. In effect, there appeared to be a division of political labor: whereas the ruling party had affirmed ethnic conflict, voicing taukeist opposition to Indian demands, the Council of Chiefs was encouraged by both Rabuka and Mara to perform a conciliatory role.

In concluding, I want to stress that I am not suggesting chiefly authority is the solution to Fiji's problems, nor disregarding the dominance of commoners now in political leadership. I am simply arguing a case about the importance of the chiefs as one factor among others in a political field, one that has not been well understood in the postcoup literature. The function I attribute to the chiefs is a symbolic and legitimating one rather than one of political power. The chiefs have been crucial in enabling a strong but constrained form of expression of Fijian ethnonational sentiments within the national polity that has helped to free action by political leaders for dialogue and compromise in interethnic relations. To the extent that chiefly councils continue to perform this function, whether at their own initiative or at the urging of political leaders of whatever rank, they will help support the democratic system now in place (contrast Lawson 1996, 1997).

But the accommodation of ethnic and national political domains will remain uncertain. There has long been a contradiction between popular Fijian resentments and anxieties in opposition to non-Fijians perceived to dominate the economy, and leaders who are seen to compromise Fijian interests by collaborating with those non-Fijian interests. The first leader beset by this problem, Ratu Sir Lala Sukuna, was protected by the colonial state's suppression of threatening dissent (by exiling the millenarian leader Apolosi Nawai) and by the absence of a popular Fijian franchise. The second, Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, Sukuna's nephew and protégé and Fiji's prime minister from 1970 until 1987, was inhibited in his willingness to meet Indian demands by the emergence of an ethnonationalist group, the Fijian National Party, soon after independence (Norton 1990,

ch 6; Rutz 1995). Rabuka has had to contend with the same contradiction without the advantage of chiefly rank and still depending on a charisma founded in the most aggressive ethnonationalist action of all.¹⁹ His vulnerability in respect to this contradiction was a factor in his electoral defeat in 1999.

POSTSCRIPT

The final revision of this paper was undertaken after the overwhelming defeat of the SVT and NFP coalition in the 1999 elections by the Labour Party and three allied Fijian parties. The outcome of this most remarkable election in Fiji's history signaled the possibility of a new phase in political development: a government responding to popular interests that cut across the ethnic divide—the lost promise of the ill-fated Bavadra government in 1987. This time Labour's Fijian support was stronger, especially through the second preferences of its Fijian allies.

The constitutional reform had reconstructed, perhaps more surely than ever before, an institutional and ideological framework for containing ethnonationalism and encouraging interethnic political cooperation. In their joint campaigning, Rabuka and Reddy promised to strengthen "multiracialism," political stability, and economic prosperity on the basis of their constitutional achievement. Although the persistence of ethnically divisive issues concerning land and political power gave relevance to this platform, the new constitution had opened the way for a new direction in political leadership on long-simmering bread-and-butter concerns of everyday life.

The strategic alliance that devastated the SVT-NFP coalition was led by the party that, with its uncompromising universalist ideology, had seemed marginalized during the process of constitutional reform. Ironically, however, Labour owed its victory not just to a new popularity of its ideology (mainly with Indian voters), but more to an unprecedented political fragmentation of Fijians partly provoked by ethnicist resentment against Rabuka's compromising with Indian demands. Some Fijian leaders denounced Rabuka for betraying the promise of his coups by agreeing to a change that would jeopardize indigenous power—they pointed out that a majority of the provincial councils had opposed the reform. While this issue helped several Fijian parties to erode the SVT's support, Reddy's NFP lost every seat to Labour because of the unpopularity of its alliance with the coup maker and growing anxieties about the future of farm leases (an

issue on which the NFP seemed more deferential to the Fijian owners than concerned to defend the Indian tenants).

Both the SVT and the NFP were weakened also by discontents over unemployment and poverty, and allegations of government neglect, mismanagement, and corruption. Appealing to these concerns under the banner of the Peoples' Coalition, the Labour Party and its Fijian allies won 71 percent of seats in the House of Representatives. With 31 Indian and 6 Fijian members, Labour was the strongest group. Its leader, Mahendra Chaudhry, became the first Indian to lead the government, but selected a majority of Fijian ministers for his cabinet. Fiji's president, Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, refused a request by the Fijian Association Party, Labour's principal partner, that its leader be appointed prime minister. Rabuka himself, while reproving Indians for a "racial" alignment with Labour and warning against actions that might be seen to threaten Fijian interests, urged Fijians to support the new government. A protest march organized by extremists drew little support.

Chaudhry sought to dispel Fijian anxieties in a speech to the Council of Chiefs promising to protect and advance indigenous interests and to consult with the chiefs. Though many Fijians remained troubled by the appointment of an Indian prime minister, commonly exclaiming that "this is our land, and a Fijian should lead!" the predominant view is acceptance in anticipation of action on the electoral promises. But Chaudhry must contend with the continuing potential for ethnic conflict within his coalition and with obstacles that demands of the international economy will impose on his attempts to tackle unemployment and poverty. Rabuka has resigned from Parliament to become full-time chairman of the Council of Chiefs where, still a potent icon of ethnic power, he will have an enhanced capacity to encourage Fijians to either oppose or cooperate with the new government.

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THIS PAPER continues a study of Fiji's politics begun in 1966. It is based mainly on material collected during visits totaling twenty months from 1993 to 1999, mostly in Suva, and partly while teaching in the Department of Sociology at the University of the South Pacific. I thank that university, especially Professor Nii Plange and Professor Epeli Hau'ofa, for generously allowing me time throughout 1995 to interview political and trade union leaders and other local figures, attend political rallies and public hearings of the Constitutional Review Commission, and study in the Fiji National Archives. I acknowledge assistance from Ms Mar-

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Notes

1 Under the 1990 Constitution the House of Representatives comprised 37 Fijians, 27 Indians, 5 General Voters, 1 Rotuman. An upper house (the Senate) comprised a majority of Fijians chosen by the Fijian Great Council of Chiefs, and several nominees of the president, who is himself appointed by the Council of Chiefs.

2 While Indians see modern Fiji as the creation of their labor, skill, and capital, overcoming barbarity and bush (which allegedly would return if they left), Fijians commonly hold that Christianity, now at the core of their culture, transformed them from barbarity and created modern Fiji, and that this recent moral heritage, together with indigenous rights, sets them above the Indians, counterbalancing Indian strengths in economy and education. Fijians often denigrate behavior seen to be un-Fijian as “behaving like an Indian” (*vaka kai Idia*)—especially self-centered competitive and acquisitive behavior neglectful of family and communal obligations. At the same time, in submissions to the Constitutional Review Commission, they sometimes justified their demand for special power and privilege on the grounds that in “civilization” the Indians have a thousand years start on them. Indians in conversation with one another sometimes refer to Fijians as *jati* (caste, with the connotation of lower caste and backwardness) and also use certain other terms that characterize Fijians as inferiors.

3 In the debate that approved constitutional reform, Rabuka questioned the concept of *integration*, insisting that “promoting harmonious co-existence must be the central thrust of our approach” (FHR 4 Aug 1997, 369).

4 Professor Brij Lal (Fiji Indian historian) and Mr Tomasi Vakatora (Fijian businessman and former cabinet minister).

5 “General Electors” are voters other than Fijians, Indians, and Rotumans (the tiny island of Rotuma is a dependency of Fiji). In 1994 General Electors numbered 11,000 of the 330,000 voters. Europeans and part-Europeans (most with Fijian ancestry) have been politically dominant in this category, though about one-third of General Electors are Chinese and “Other Pacific Islanders.” As in precoup governments Europeans and Part-Europeans continued to be dis-

proportionately represented in Rabuka's cabinet up to 1999 (3 of the 17 members in 1997). The main General Voters' petition to the Constitutional Review Commission urged preservation of Fijian political dominance.

6 The elaboration of the *taukei-vulagi* theme in the SVT petition is based on Ravuvu 1991.

7 Maan Singh (FHR, 27 Nov 1995, 1607). At least one SVT minister publicly condemned the petition, and one or two others privately expressed embarrassment to Indian leaders.

8 Mara has long been a proponent of "multiracialism," partly from pragmatic motives. In the early 1960s, encouraged by a colonial governor, he persuaded colleagues to accept the idea of an interracial alliance as the only way to secure Fijian political control, and he governed Fiji through that alliance from 1966 until 1987.

9 The Catholic Church, which has many Fijian members (including Ratu Mara), proposed a common roll, with proportionate representation to ensure a balanced distribution of seats: "People should be voting as 'citizens of Fiji.' . . . Our political institutions should bring us together, not keep us apart" (CRC-S Sep 1995); local Fijian Catholic groups did not necessarily agree (see CRC-S 002005). The orthodox Hindu religious body, Sanatan Dharm Pratinidhi Sabha, declared: "People of Fiji must appreciate that they are part of an international family and our constitution must find acceptance in other democracies of the world" (CRC-S 003002).

10 I quote from several Indian petitions to illustrate the manner in which Fijian ethnocentrism was sometimes countered: "The Indians . . . brought Fiji out of savagery to the present brilliant, progressive and prosperous status" (CRC-VT vol 2, 20 July 1995); "Fijians want ready made money . . . ready made *kana* (food) . . . ready made clothing and housing. Fairy tale life style won't work. . . . One thing was good, that we Indo-Fijians were in Fiji, otherwise the Fijian population would have been only good enough [to] suit Museums and Zoos and the highland as [happened] in New Zealand, Australia, and America with the natives" (CRC-S 024044); Fijian tribes fought "when they were uncivilised and since the Indians developed this land and created a healthy environment our Fijian friends think we should stay under their foot or that they should dominate the ruins of this country" (Tavua District Youth Council, CRC-S 004008).

11 Rabuka warned his cabinet colleagues against associating with Taukei Movement leaders: "They should work with me in looking after the nation" (*Fiji Times*, 26 Sep 1996, 1).

12 Rabuka's proposal in 1992 to form a "government of national unity" was condemned by the Taukei Movement as a betrayal of the objectives of the coups (*Fiji Times*, 18 Dec 1992, 3).

13 A rural Fijian politician aligned with the main Indian party first impressed

on me the importance of this link as the ideological basis of the chiefs' dominance in Fijian leadership in colonial times (Isikeli Nadalo, at Batiri in Nadroga province, 24 July 1970).

14 Kaplan has perhaps overstated the "land" side in the chiefs—"land people" relationship for Fijian society in general. Her analysis is grounded mainly in research on the province of Ra, where traditional local chiefly authority was weakly developed in relation to the "people of the land" and their priests, in sharp contrast to southeast Vitilevu and the eastern islands where powerful chiefs had emerged well before colonial influences.

15 See Toren 1990 for an analysis of how hierarchical values are instilled and reinforced in the process of maturation from child to adult.

16 Some Indian petitioners urged a strong position for the chiefs: "Fijian chiefly system must prevail at high esteem" (D Ram for Lautoka Sanatan Dharm, CRC-S 003008); a leading businessman declared that the Council of Chiefs "has performed fantastically for this country" and should be given a wider role to allow Indians and others to approach it with their requests and proposals (M Patel, CRC-VT vol 1, 4 July 1995, 46).

17 The address was arranged by Rabuka and Ratu Mara after Reddy protested against the chiefs' initial opposition to agreements on the electoral system being negotiated in the JPSC discussions.

18 On the general issue of persisting importance of chiefs in Oceanic societies, see Lindstrom and White 1997.

19 An illustration of the ethnicist pressure on reforming leaders is a cabinet minister's declaration early in 1996, while Rabuka was overseas, that a "Taukei Sugar Cane Growers' Council" was to be formed to work toward Fijian control of the sugar industry. The proposal divided the SVT leadership, and on his return Rabuka assured thousands of alarmed Indian farmers that it would not be implemented. (Milling and marketing are controlled by the state, but 80 percent of growers are Indians).

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CRC-S, Constitutional Review Commission

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CRC-VT, Constitutional Review Commission

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Abstract

The process of Fiji's recent constitutional reform highlighted the dilemma of reconciling a principle of indigenous Fijian paramountcy with an imperative to shape a multiethnic nation for which non-Fijian, particularly Indian, contributions have long been crucial. The article addresses this dilemma in a discussion of the dominant themes in public discourse about constitutional change, and the relation of these themes to the values, pressures, and opportunities of three arenas: ethnic, national, and international. Three contrasting paradigms for the nation are identified: a universalist vision grounded in international human rights ideology, an exclusionary Fijian ethnonationalism affirmed most strongly in the army coups of 1987 and their aftermath, and an interethnic accommodation and partnership in which leading Fijian chiefs continue to have a stabilizing and legitimating function. The last model prevailed in the constitutional reform,

demonstrating a continuity with trends in the shaping of political culture during colonial and early postcolonial times. The story of the constitutional reform is in part the saga of how the ethnonationalist coup maker who became prime minister, Sitiveni Rabuka, has tried to remake himself as a national leader. In the crucial role he eventually assumed as overseer of reform, he depended on support from chiefs and their councils. The paper concludes, against much of the post-coup literature on Fiji, that over the long term the major significance of the chiefs in the national political arena is not as a privileged "vested interest" group obstructing a solution to the problem of establishing a viable democratic polity, but as *part* of this solution.

KEYWORDS: chiefs, constitutional reform, ethnicity, Fiji, nation, political change, Rabuka